5. Case Study - Bluewater

Around 15% of the land surface of the Borough has been quarried, for sand and gravel or chalk. By the 1980s most of the redundant chalk quarries had been filled or were being filled with household waste. The chalk quarries are within the urban area and adjacent to existing residential communities. This coupled with Thameside heavy industries such as the manufacturing of cement and paper and ship repair gave the Borough a generally poor image. Whilst the town was well known due to the Dartford Tunnel it was a place people tended to travel through rather than visit or choose to live.

In the mid 1980s the future of the chalk quarry at Western Quarry, a 100 hectare site about 50 metres deep, started to be considered. There were a number of possible uses. The planning consent required the quarry to be restored to agricultural use on the quarry floor. There was also the option of filling the quarry with household waste. This would have taken decades to fill and would have resulted in refuse collection vehicles continuing to pass through the urban area as well as the need to safeguard surrounding residential areas from methane gas migration. The Council was keen to promote uses that would help reverse the generally negative view of the area.

The planning application for Bluewater was submitted at a time when the local economy was undergoing rapid and significant change. The heavy Thameside industries were contracting or closing down. Not only were there opportunities for new development on these sites but also a need for new employment.

The Council actively supported the regional shopping centre proposal when it was submitted in 1986 because:

- It provided an imaginative solution to the restoration and after-use problems raised by the extraction of chalk on a huge scale from Western Quarry;
- It would provide a tremendous boost to the economy of North West Kent both in terms of job creation and in harnessing spending power within the Borough; and
- It would help uplift the whole image of the Dartford area, which would have a positive impact on people's perception of the area and on other decisions which flow from this, especially in relation to investment prospects.

These expectations have been more than realised.

Historically the area has been a place where 'standard' often mediocre development has been built. Bluewater, with it high quality award wining design has enable the Council to successfully pursue a policy of seeking much higher quality design in new development, as witnessed in the award winning development at Ingress Park and also at Waterstone Park both close to Bluewater.

Bluewater was conceived at a time when there was a generally permissive attitude towards regional shopping centres and edge-of-centre and out-of-

centre locations were acceptable locations and dependence on car-borne visitors was the norm. The SERPLAN report on 'A policy for Regional Shopping Centres' (1988) concluded that there was a qualitative gap in strategic shopping provision in the A2 corridor in North Kent. Regional planning guidance, Structure Plan policy and Local Plan policy have moved forward since then such that Bluewater will eventually be an integral part of the expanded Kent Thameside urban community and will be surrounded on its western, northern and eastern sides by primarily residential communities, and be linked by the Fastrack public transport system with Dartford and Gravesend town centres and the CTRL international and domestic passenger station at Ebbsfleet.

Bluewater was proposed and permitted in the pre Rio Earth Summit era, when sustainability was not an issue. Nevertheless the Council through the development control process was able to persuade the applicant to significantly increase the size of the bus station provided at Bluewater, with the aim of providing scope for future expansion of public transport services. Such was the demand by bus companies that the bus station operated at capacity from the opening day.

The Council, along with Gravesham Borough and Kent County, is promoting the implementation of a public transport network known as 'Fastrack'. Phase 1 is due to be operational in late 2005/early 2006 will link Bluewater with Dartford and Gravesham town centres. Future phases will link the shopping centre with new residential communities at Eastern Quarry and the CTRL station and employment centre at Ebbsfleet.

The Council has promoted the Green Grid in the area and with the developers consent Bluewater nestles within a new 50 hectare parkland that forms a significant element of the Green Grid.

The developer established a forum with local community groups during the construction phase of the development which the Council willingly participated in and continues to attend and contribute to. The forum helped elucidate local concerns as well as suggestions to improve the scheme, many of which were taken on board.